

Med Group earns high marks from AFMC

PHOTOS AND STORY BY
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A change in how patients are seen by health care providers at the 377th Medical Group's Family Medicine, Pediatrics and Internal Medicine clinics has earned the top rating by the Air Force Materiel Command for provider availability.

In September 2003, the medical group withdrew use of the Routine Access system through which patients saw health care providers within seven days from making the appointment. The clinic now uses Open Access, which allows patients to be seen within 24 hours of calling the TRICARE appointment line.

"With this new system, pretty much the day you call you are going to be seen," said Lt. Col. Margaret Foltz, 377th Medical Group Medical Services Flight commander. "In the past, patients were booked according to how severe their illnesses were, but now we try to get everyone, except wellness appointments, in within 24 hours."

This new system should greatly benefit patients, Foltz believes.

"Most people expect to be seen the same day or relatively soon, however, if a patient wants an appointment further out, then they can still do that."

"The push is to get people in as quickly as we can, no matter whether it's something that really has to be seen today or just a routine matter," she said.

Maj. James Wooten, 377th Medical Group Practice manager, said the old system wasn't effective at Kirtland AFB.

"In the past, the average time it took to get seen was two weeks, which means we weren't meeting the one-week goal," Wooten said.

"Basically, what we have done is to build more appointments into the provider's schedule and changed our appointment process. And, so far,

through the hard work and dedication of our staff, the new system is working well."

Statistics comparing provider availability at other bases in the command and with bases Air Force-wide provide evidence that the new process is effective.

"With this new system the group has earned the highest rating AFMC-wide in provider availability during the month of October," he said, "which means our providers have more time on their schedules available to see these patients than others in the command according to a metric which measures statistics like this."

Wooten also noted that, according to the metric, their numbers are much higher than the Air Force average.

"Basically, our providers are putting in a lot of time and effort to see the patients, even more than the average provider in the Air Force," Wooten added.

"Another great benefit is the 'no-show' rate has gone down," Wooten said. "We attribute this to the new system. If you call today and are seen today, you are less likely to forget your appointment. You don't have to remember three weeks from now that you have an appointment."

"The no-show rate currently is 3.8 percent, which is very good," he added. "Five to 7 percent is considered acceptable in the Air Force."

Foltz added that to keep the system working, patients are encouraged to first try home remedies whenever possible before calling for an appointment.

"Certain things you can reasonably treat at home like the cold, vomiting or diarrhea, and a patient should only call in more serious cases," she said.

To help patients determine whether an illness could be handled at home or if medical treatment needed, a 24-hour nurse advice line is available to TRICARE patients. The TLC-TRICARE Line for Care toll-free number is 888-887-4111.



ABOVE—Patients wait to be seen at the Family Medicine Clinic at the 377th Medical Group



ABOVE—Maj. Eric Goldman, Internal Medicine doctor, checks a patient's heartbeat during an examination.



ABOVE—Lt. Col. Lynne Foss, 377th Medical Group Pediatric Clinic, checks the ear of Nicholas Casaus during a routine physical examination.



ABOVE—Staff Sgt. Jason Bradley, a medical technician, injects a patient's toe with anesthesia in preparation of the removal of the toe nail.



ABOVE—Jack Eastman, a Coumadin and Diabetic nurse, talks about treatment options with a patient.